

The Mergui-Tenasserim Region in the Context of the Maritime Silk Road: From the Beginning of the Christian Era to the End of the Thirteenth Century AD

Most of the archaeological remains which are found along the coasts of the Malay Peninsula in the period under study are closely linked to the existence of a widespread maritime trade sometimes known as the Maritime Silk Road trade. The different worlds of Asia were involved: China, India, the Middle East and, of course, Southeast Asia.¹

This trade actually began during the first centuries of the Christian era, but the first archaeological remains which can be considered historical date from the fifth century AD. These are brahmanical but also include Buddhist images, the latter associated with inscriptions; one of them – the Buddhagupta inscription discovered in South Kedah (Malaysia) (Jacq-Hergoualc'h 1992a, 219-221) – testifies to the existence of Indian traders along these shores.

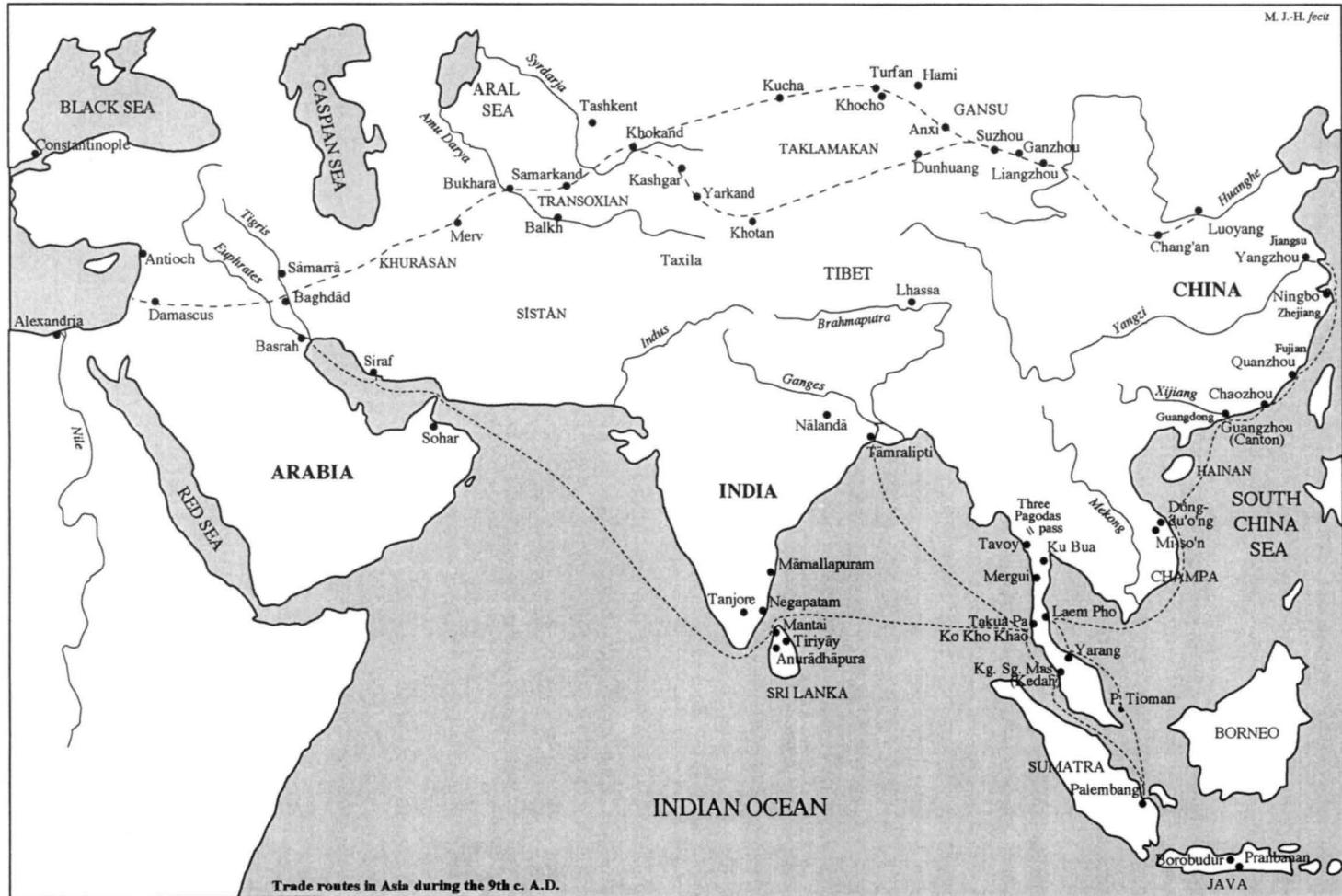
Initially considered a barrier by foreign sailors – a barrier to be circumnavigated as quickly as possible in order to sail farther to the east or to the west – the Malay Peninsula soon became a stopping-off place for ships, as traders called in at different ports to obtain a wide range of valuable local products, exchanging goods with each other at the same time. This was the beginning of what I call the *entrepôt* ports civilization.

Almost all the regions of the Malay Peninsula were naturally endowed to offer a wide range of local products to foreign traders, but only some sections of the coast – specifically those in the middle part – developed particular forms of civilization and saw the birth of prosperous *entrepôt* ports. There were geographical reasons for this.

Approaching from the west, that is, from India or, still farther away, from the Middle East, making use of the winds of the southwest monsoon, ships reached the Peninsula between the sixth and the thirteenth north latitudes, after crossing the Bay of Bengal by the shortest routes. From the east, if navigators wanted to sail to the Peninsula quickly after passing Cape Cà Mau and hugging the shores of Campa and Cambodia, they had to cross the Gulf of Thailand, reaching the same latitudes on the winds of the northeast monsoon.

This middle section of the Peninsula also happens to be its narrowest part, an isth-

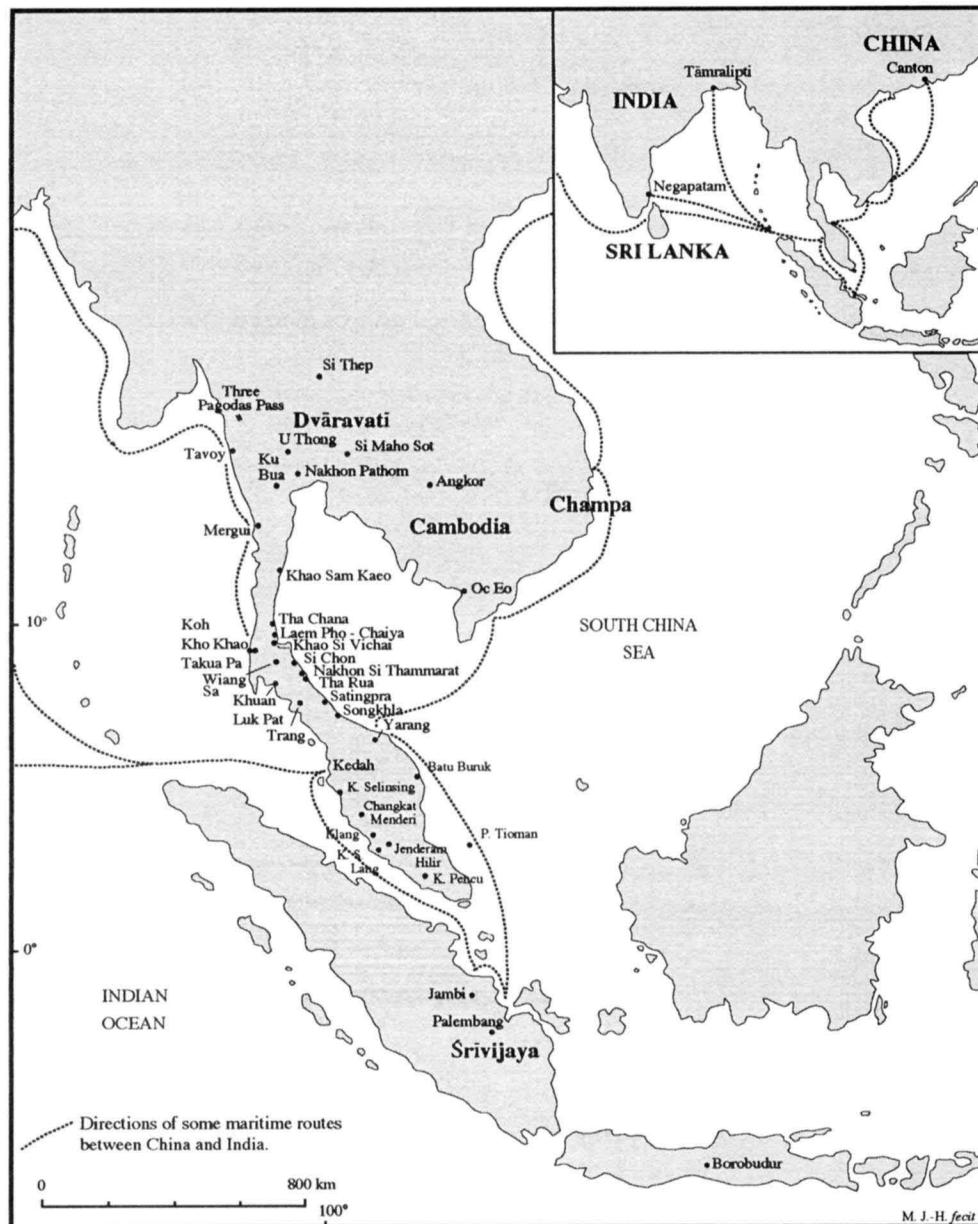
¹ This trade was still profitable after the thirteenth century AD, but the arrival of the Thais and of Islam in the Malay Peninsula around the beginning of the fourteenth century represents the limit of our study.



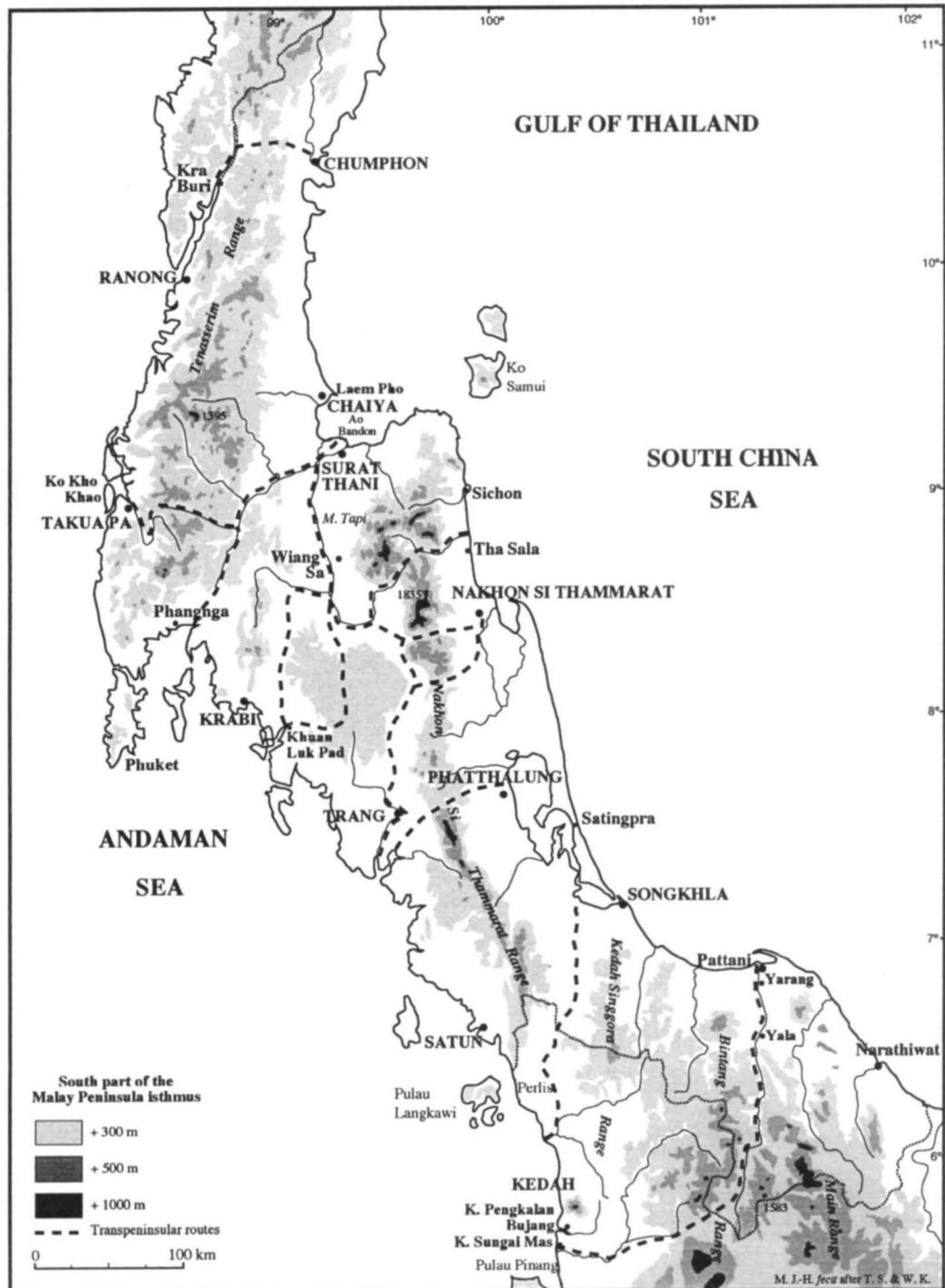
Map 6: Trade routes in Asia during the ninth century AD.

mus, the Isthmus of Kra, with isthmus to be understood in its broadest sense. This helps to explain the locations of the principal entrepôt ports, and suggests the existence of transpeninsular routes as an alternative to the transportation of goods around the Peninsula by sea.

But despite the attraction of its narrow width, the Peninsula is not easy to cross from



Map 7: Some archaeological sites and sea routes in and around the Malay Peninsula.



Map 8: The southern part of the Malay Peninsula Isthmus.

one coast to the other (Jacq-Hergoualc'h 1999). The geomorphology is entirely dominated by mountain ranges lying staggered in step formation, cutting lengthwise across the Peninsula on NNE-SSW lines. Possible routes between them are long and risky, since it is necessary to go from one point to another obliquely, following the direction of the ranges. Nevertheless, it might seem that the river valleys running from the line of the summits to the two coasts, combined with the low altitude at many points along these ranges, could have made the use of short transpeninsular routes possible. This is an attractive suggestion, and has been well received, but in our view even the shortest route would have been difficult to negotiate because of the topography (sharp relief, rivers that are extremely difficult to navigate, dense tropical forest, dangerous fauna, and so on), and we do not believe that such routes were much used by navigators, who, in spite of the distance, we suspect, would have preferred to sail up and down the Straits when they wished to reach the other coast. Furthermore, how else can we explain the prosperity of Sri Vijaya, at Palembang, from the seventh century, if a large part of the international trade avoided the circum-peninsular route? Even if they daunted international traders, these routes dominated by their rivers were the main elements in a dendritic network making it possible for local tropical products to reach the coast by means of a system which was well described by B. Bronson (1977), in which the aborigines (Orang Asli) played an important role.

In spite of this convergence of maritime routes in the middle section of the Peninsula, the forms of civilization that emerged from this trade were very different from one coast to the other, again because of geographical factors.

1. Geologically, the west coast is a submergence coast. This means that the sea has penetrated deeply into the mountains, creating certain types of fjords or abers (the most typical being the estuary of the Kraburi river), multiple small islands and islets gathered into archipelagos (the Mergui Archipelago is one of the most complex along this coast), and, especially, limiting the coastal plains to a thin strip of earth somewhat enlarged over the centuries by alluvial deposits (the most significant and the most spectacular example of this being the coastal plain of South Kedah, which did not exist during the first centuries of the historic period covered in this study (Jacq-Hergoualc'h 1992a, 288-290). These facts are significant, establishing that the west coast of the Malay Peninsula was very sparsely populated at the time. Clearly this limited population could not have supported the creation of local complex societies, politically, socially and economically.

Considering the archaeological remains revealed along this coast, it is difficult to imagine any other explanation for their existence than that animist chiefdoms interested in profits welcomed the foreign traders, and were tolerant enough to allow the traders to build temples to the glory of their gods on Malay soil. The only religious remains that have been discovered have been Indian, but it is very likely that the Chinese and the Muslims had their own religious buildings, built of wood and consequently not preserved.

2. The east coast, on the other hand, is an emergence coast along which silting has smoothed the shore very effectively, as shown by the numerous littoral spits of land. The development of these spits can be traced from the sixteenth century AD, using the

first European maps of the area which were drawn at this time. The coastal plains continued to grow, and were intensively cultivated in spite of their relatively poor soils, watered sporadically by the rains of the two monsoons.

The local populations were more numerous than those on the west coast and, consequently, were organized, both politically and socially, in a more sophisticated way. All these small societies along the coast became Indianized at about the same time as those in South India, when it became evident to their chiefs that the Indian model of organization —which they had known of for a long time through their commercial contacts — was the best suited to dealing with problems linked to the economic development brought about by the expansion of international trade.

Indianized city-states were created over the centuries: Panpan (in the region of Chaiya, Surat Thani province, Thailand), Langkasuka (in the region of Yarang, Pattani province, Thailand) Tambralinga (Nakhon Si Thammarat, Nakhon Si Thammarat province, Thailand) (Jacq-Hergoualc'h 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998). Traditionally animist, these peoples had become worshippers of the Brahmanic gods and followers of Buddha after the example of their sovereigns who adopted Indian ceremonial in their courts and set up local governments on the Indian model in order to strengthen their authority.

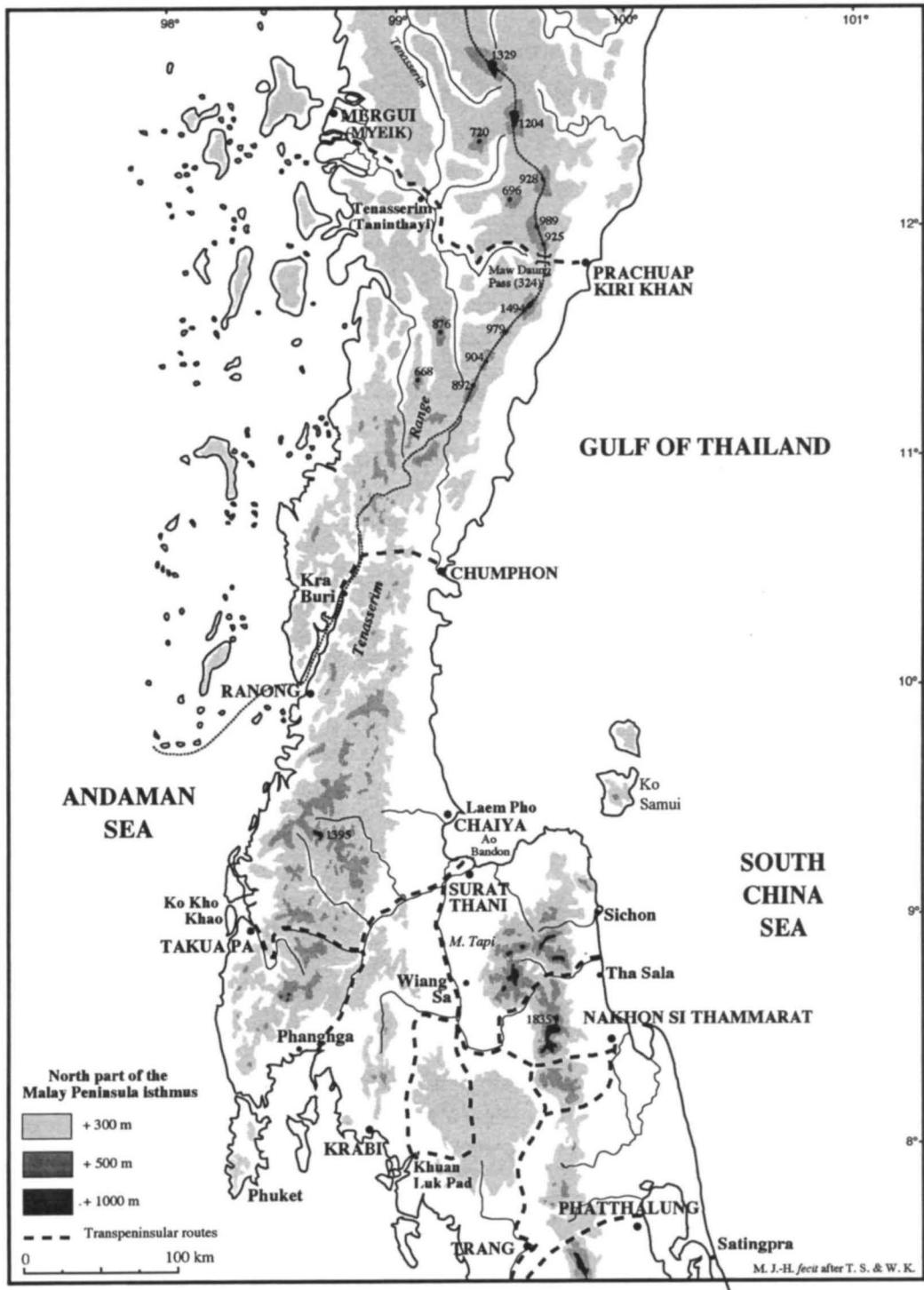
The cities, but also some other parts of the territory, were equipped with temples and the images necessary for the observance of the new religions. If there are no real differences between the images from one coast to the other (they are merely more numerous on the east coast), the temples are very different. Those on the west coast were built hastily and opportunistically at the initiative of the Indian traders, who only remained in the area for a few months at most. Temples on the east coast, on the other hand, were built with much more sophistication by local kings or their subjects, who had been won over completely to the beliefs propagated in these new places of worship.

The ports of call, the entrepôt ports at the origin of these great economic, political and social changes, probably differed considerably in appearance from one coast to the other, but their function was the same: to facilitate contacts between foreign traders and enable them to obtain local products such as ores (especially tin) and the whole range of 'strange and precious' products of the tropical forests.

Most of these port settlements were established in an estuary or in an area protected from the monsoon winds by an island or sand dune. The periods in which these ports were active varied greatly, from several decades to several centuries, depending on international developments as well as on local silting conditions, which could render them unfit for the requirements of the trade and necessitate the creation of a new entrepôt port elsewhere, or a little farther down the estuary of the river.

All these archaeological remains in the Malay Peninsula with direct links to the commercial activities of the Maritime Silk Road have been carefully studied in both Malaysia and Thailand. No comparable research has been undertaken along the shores of the Burmese sections of the Peninsula. It is nevertheless certain that they were also part of the trade route, particularly in the region of Mergui-Tenasserim (Myeik-Taninthayi).

I went to Mergui-Tenasserim in February 1999 in the hope of finding remains simi-



Map 9: The northern part of the Malay Peninsula Isthmus.

lar to the ones I had just finished studying in other parts of the Peninsula. Unfortunately, I was not permitted to travel into the interior of the country as far as Tenasserim to obtain some concrete information. In fact, I believe that in the first centuries in which the different entrepôt ports were created (there were probably more than one), they were in the vicinity of this city, that is to say, at the lower end of the estuary of the Tenasserim River, which was necessarily broader than it is now. In the absence of an archaeological survey that could provide some answers, it is still possible to reinterpret some early testimonies, to re-examine some previously discovered remains, and to study some new pieces I was able to photograph at Mergui to put together a more complete picture of these ports and their trade.

1. The oldest entrepôt ports localized in Malaysia and in South Thailand date from only the ninth century AD, though we know that others existed before that time. They are Laem Pho on the east coast in the region of Chaiya (Surat Thani province, Thailand), Ko Koh Khao on the west coast in the vicinity of Takua Pa (north of Phuket, Thailand) (Jacq-Hergoualc'h 1998), and Kampong Sungai Mas in South Kedah (Malaysia) (Jacq-Hergoualc'h 1992a, 199-204), on the same coast. It is highly likely that at least one other will be localized in the area of the major archaeological site of Yarang (Pattani Province, Thailand) in the next few years (Jacq-Hergoualc'h 1995).

All these ports, like their successors, are characterized by remains of various products brought to them by foreign traders: pieces of broken glass vessels and ceramics from the Middle East, and, principally, countless sherds of Chinese ceramics which appear to have been abandoned on these sites during transshipment or cleaning operations on the cargo ships. Among these remains, the latter – the Chinese sherds – have been attributed precisely and exclusively to the ninth century AD in some recent studies (Ho Chuimei, 1991, 1991a, 1994).

It is certain that the vicinity of Tenasserim sheltered an entrepôt port of the same type. As evidence of its existence we possess only the very superficial, very 'literary', and very scanty archaeological testimony of an English civil servant, M. Collis (1953), who stayed on in the area during the period between the two world wars. His chief desire was to discover intact Chinese ceramics. He was not at all interested in the spectacular concentrations of sherds he went through (Collis, 1953, 219) and was rewarded for his efforts, as he was able to relate that the locals eventually brought him 'over 250 unbroken specimens of Chinese ceramics ranging from the T'ang period (618-906) to the eighteenth century' (Collis, 1953, 227). We may therefore expect to find some as well, and in particular, to locate the site of the entrepôt port, thanks to the presence of these sherds.

The geographical and human context pertaining to the west coast of the Peninsula, as we have seen, is also valid for the vicinity of Mergui-Tenasserim; it does not permit us to expect much. However, it is likely that, just as in South Kedah and in the vicinity of Ko Koh Khao-Takua Pa, some temples were built by Indian traders. A careful archaeological survey should be able to specify the locations of some of them, in association with images found near them. The images in South Kedah during this period were mainly *stupa*, with some statues and inscriptions of Buddhist creeds. In the vicinity of Takua Pa, remains of some religious buildings were also uncovered, but these were brahmanical, one of them being associated with the most

spectacular image of Visnu ever found in Southeast Asia. Some Buddhist remains have also been found.

There is no reason to be surprised by the co-existence of the two great Indian religions, especially in the chiefdoms of the west coast. Both were the religions of foreign traders, not of the local people. Nevertheless, in the city states of the east coast during the ninth century (Panpan, Langkasuka), the situation was not fundamentally different, as is attested by contemporary Chinese writings.

The Ko Koh Khao-Takua Pa entrepôt port site has been compared to the Laem Pho-Chaiya entrepôt port with some insistence, because the archaeological remains of both sites are fairly similar. This parallel, however, was made chiefly to support the claim – which became, *a priori*, unassailable – that a transpeninsular route existed between the two sites, along which the preponderance of the traded goods would have passed in transit. The concept was not new; Quaritch Wales (1935) had earlier contributed some observations on the matter in an effort to demonstrate the existence of such a route at a time when the entrepôt port sites had not yet been identified.

As has already been mentioned, I do not believe in this concept of busy transpeninsular routes, at least for the purposes attributed to them. Such routes could never have been used for transporting Chinese ceramics or the goods shipped from the Middle East. Their use at a time when the rivers were less silted than they are today could only have been occasional. As is well known, underwater explorations of wrecks of some ancient cargo ships have revealed that all the material previously mentioned was transported as ballast in the holds of ships taking a circumpeninsular route. It is difficult to imagine why, in such a situation, the rest of the cargo, consisting of the most precious goods, would not have been transported by the same route.

Theoretically, a transpeninsular route would also join the vicinity of Mergui-Tenasserim with the east coast, where it would reach the region of the Thai town Pra-chuap Kiri Khan (see Map 8). It would then follow the current of the Tenasserim river and some of its tributaries to the Maw Daung pass (324 m), from which it is possible to see both the Bay of Bengal and the Gulf of Thailand. This pass provides access to the eastern side of the Tenasserim Range, which is the only mountain of the Peninsula at this latitude, and to the Gulf of Thailand. In spite of the use of the rivers on the western side of the range, this route would have been difficult and full of pitfalls. These difficulties were described by two French writers of the seventeenth century, who made use of the route; although their accounts were written well after our period, the testimonies contained in them are very instructive. The first was Jacques de Bourges (1666, Chap. ix), a missionary of the French *Société des Missions Etrangères* from Paris, who accompanied Mgr. Lambert de La Motte, bishop of Beryte,² on his trip to China in 1662. The second Frenchman to use the route at that time was Claude Céberet de Boulay, ambassador of Louis XIV to the King of Siam, Phra Narai, in 1687, with Simon de la Loubère (Jacq-Hergoualc'h 1992:143-154). One of his missions at the end of the ambassadorial visit was to travel to Mergui, where the Siamese king had given the French permission to settle. He used an east-west route (the missionaries before him

² This part of the text was translated into English (Smithies 1993, 114-116).

had come from the west) and in spite of great preparations for the journey undertaken by the Siamese authorities, met with numerous difficulties.³

We cannot deny the existence of transpeninsular routes, chiefly in modern times, when their use became more frequent in what had become a more densely populated Peninsula, on which new routes were established, but their use during our period of study could have been only sporadic, and could never have involved the transportation of goods in great quantities. Consequently, it is not possible to explain the birth of an entrepôt port by the possible existence of such a route, as has been done, I believe, much too often.

2. As already mentioned, the life of an entrepôt port could be relatively short or it could last for several centuries. It is likely that because of classic problems of silting, the entrepôt port which succeeded the one established during the ninth century AD in the vicinity of the river near Tenasserim was created a little way downstream.

It is also likely that the period corresponding to the tenth-eleventh centuries AD was marked by a decline in trading activities, as it was in the other parts of the Peninsula, and that the end of the eleventh century, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and the beginning of the fourteenth century saw these activities pick up again as they had elsewhere. This is what can be postulated from the presence of numerous Chinese ceramics from the Song period, whole or broken, in the vicinity of Tenasserim, as reported by M. Collis. At Mergui, in the small museum of the main monastery, the Phaya Theindawgyi, located on the hill in front of the bay, we photographed a small Chinese celadon jarlet (see illustration 1).

The commercial prosperity revealed by these ceramics and other objects could explain why the kings of Pagan seem to have been interested in the region from the eleventh century. Anawratha (1044-1077), the first historical king of the kingdom of Pagan and the most famous of the dynasty he established, was the first to bring political unity to Burma by integrating into his empire areas which were the fruit of his conquests, including Lower Burma, that is to say, the country of the Mons. The circumstances and limits of this expansion towards the south are not clear. Burmese chronicles describe the fall of Thaton in 1057, but mention no conquest farther south. Nevertheless, some archaeological remains do give the impression that the Burmese armies conquered territories much farther to the south, probably attracted by the reputation for wealth of the entrepôt port of Mergui-Tenasserim.

It is at Mergui itself, at the Mingyaung monastery (Thanbo quarter), that a well-preserved votive tablet signed by Anoratha was discovered, as reported by G.H. Luce (1966, 59; 1969-70, I: 27). This good-sized tablet (H. 17.7, 1.13.2 cm) is of a type quite common in Burma, showing fifty Earth-Touching Buddhas, all the same size (see illustration 2).

Each Buddha sits on a double lotus in a beaded panel, with a small *stupa* between his nimbus and those of the Buddha next to him. There are six rows. At the bottom is a line of Pali in Nagari script carved in high relief which reads as follows: 'This Blessed One was made by the great king Sri Anoratha the divine, donor of the mould'.

³ This part of his account was recently translated into English (Smithies 1995, 56-63).

The small museum of Phaya Theindawgyi monastery at Mergui possesses two votive tablets, which were discovered in the region. They also can be dated to the eleventh century, the first one perhaps from the twelfth; this one, square below and rising to a point at the top (H. 9.6, l. 7 cm), with traces of gilding, on a limited surface displays the Eight Great Events, with an earth-touching central Buddha under a pyramidal construction with three arcades. This is comparable to some tablets illustrated by G.H. Luce (1969-70, III: Pl. 69c, d, e, f), but on our tablet there is the addition of six small Buddha figures distributed over two columns, one on either side of the central image. These supplementary figures of the Buddha, combined with the central one, represent the seven stations spent at Bodhgaya after the Enlightenment. This addition gives to the tablet a strong similarity to the iconography of some of the 'andagu' stelae (Luce 1969-70, I: 151-154; III: Pl. 401, 402b, 403, 405; Bautze-Picron 1999), but the absence of the two standing Bodhisattva usually positioned on either side of the central Buddha must be noted (see Illustration 3). The other one, of the same form (H.15, 1.9.5 cm), represents an earth-touching Buddha seated on a double lotus, under a beaded trefoil arch with an abacus resting on rounded pillars. The arch is crowned by decreasing storeys of what is supposed to be a representation of the Mahabodhi temple at Bodhgaya (see Illustration 4). Tablets similar to this last type, signed in Mon by two governors in the reign of Kyanzittha (1084-1113) (Luce 1969-70, I: 100) have been found at the Shin Mokti pagoda, ten kilometres south of Tavoy (Dawei) (see Illustration 5). Similar tablets have also been found as far south as the vicinity of the Bay of Bandon; these are preserved at the museum of Wat Phra Barommathat (Chaiya).

Even more indicative of the presence of the Burmese in the south was the discovery at the beginning of the last century (Lajonquièvre, 1909, 237, Fig. 28) of the top fragment of an inscription at Maunglaw, some sixteen kilometres south of Mergui (*Inscriptions of Burma* v, DXLVIII) (see Illustration 6). In the top arch of the stone, above a line of beading, is a fine relief carving of an earth-touching Buddha, sitting in *vajrasana* on a double lotus amid a giant forest of coiling lotus. Only the top few lines in Pali remain, referring to the 'excellent lord of the Three Existences', 'Sri Bajrabharana', who was identified by Luce (1969-70, I: 46) as Sawlu (1077-1084), son and successor of Anawratha. The stone was placed in the hall of the Yangon University Library, where it was blown to bits in the destruction of that building by the Japanese during the Second World War.

The prosperity of the region may have been the reason for another attack from outside during the third quarter of the twelfth century. This is what M.A. Aung-Thwin has suggested in a recent book (1998, Chap. 1) which sheds light on G.H. Luce's interpretation of a Burmese inscription dated 1165, and of some pages of the Sinhalese *Culavamsa* (Luce 1969-70, I: 117-128). Luce's conclusion was that Sri Lanka had attacked Burma and penetrated as far as Pagan, with the purpose of countering the supposed Burmese hegemony on the Isthmus of Kra, giving an imperialistic interpretation of the relations which could have linked the different political entities of India and Southeast Asia.

The reinterpretation by M.A. Aung-Thwin convincingly argues that the Sinhalese raid could not have involved Pagan, but was more probably concentrated on Lower

Burma, which could have been the victim of this raid, in 1165 or 1169, in a region close to Tenasserim (the identification of the place concerned, however, is not absolutely certain, and it could be a region in South India). As perhaps was also the case for the Burmese conquests in the south from the eleventh century, this Sinhalese raid may have been prompted by economic factors linked with the idea of control of the international trade in the area. We are not convinced by this hypothesis. In our opinion, the distances were too great to allow the possibility of real political control.

The raid, if raid there was, would have had very few consequences, since King Narapatisithu (1174-1211),⁴ in an inscription dated 1196-98⁵ translated by G. H. Luce, gives the borders of his kingdom as: 'to the south, Tavoy, *Cañhat* (?), *Santhut* (Thandok, southeast of Mergui), *Tanansare* (Tenasserim), *Takwa* (Takua Pa), *Salankre* (Junk Ceylon (Phuket))' (Luce 1959, n.360, p. 61 & 1969-70, I: 27), that is to say – if these indications are correct – very far to the south. With what was probably an overly imperialistic perspective, and influenced by the tendencies of the historical research of his time, G.H. Luce considered the mention of these places in the south as a visionary initiative of Anawratha, later adopted by his successors, to control the trade passing through the isthmian part of the Malay Peninsula and to make contact with the Buddhist city state of Nakhon Si Thammarat (Tambralinga) (Jacq-Hergoualc'h, 1996), which was imbued with Theravada Buddhism as were the Pagan kings after the conquest of the Mon territories.

From his study of the Nakhon Si Thammarat chronicles, D.K. Wyatt (1975, 72, & Wyatt et al., 1968, 13-14)⁶ goes further, considering that the conquest of Narapatisithu went as far as Tambralinga, which became a vassal of the Pagan king in 1176, with the agreement of the King of Sri Lanka. This claim relates to the fact that for half a century (from 1130 to 1176, according to Wyatt), Tambralinga was under the control of the island. Nevertheless, even if true, all these circumstances do not make it any easier to understand why all these regions practised the same form of Buddhism, and why buildings in Nakhon Si Thammarat and in the vicinity, have a typical Sinhalese appearance, which can also be found at Pagan (Chapata *stupa* for example).

Later on, the possibility of the presence of Burmese in the region of Mergui-Tenasserim is said to be attested by an inscription dated 1269 (*Inscriptions of Burma* III, CCXXV) found at Thandok, (Luce, 1969-70, I: 27, 46-47) (see illustration 7).

It recorded a gift to the pagoda by Nga Pon, the royal usurper of King Tayok-pyemin, 'the king who fled from the Chinese', the last King of Pagan, Narathihapati (1254-1287). Like the inscription mentioned earlier, this one was in Yangon University Library when it was blown up by the Japanese in 1945.

The Burmese were certainly interested in conquest, but, considering the distances in question, we do not believe that they were ever really able to control this southern

⁴ Dates of the reign based on the research of M. A. Aung-Thwin (1976).

⁵ Stone inscription at Dhammarajaka Pagoda, West Pwazaw, Pagan (*Inscriptions of Burma* I, XIX).

⁶ The older version of these chronicles does not appear to have been written before the second half of the sixteenth century AD, but it was inspired by earlier versions. Stone inscription at Dhammarajaka Pagoda, West Pwazaw, Pagan (*Inscriptions of Burma* I, XIX).

region, in spite of the discovery of these remains. The region of Mergui-Tenasserim most probably enjoyed the status of chiefdom during the period under consideration.

As we have tried to show, this region of Myanmar beckons with archaeological promise. We can only hope that the Myanmar authorities will let us return there in the near future. An archaeological survey and a test pit excavation are the only ways for me to confirm or refute all the *a priori* elements that gave me the idea of studying similar sites in the Malay Peninsula which came into being as a result of the dynamism of the trade along the Maritime Silk Road from the beginning of the Christian era to the end of the thirteenth century AD.

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